

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CHURCHES & NONPROFITS

Which Type of Campaign Is Right for Your Church or Nonprofit?

Capital, comprehensive, and capacity campaigns share strategies — but they serve different purposes.

Campaign terminology can be confusing. Capital, comprehensive, and capacity campaigns often use similar strategies — leadership gifts, donor conversations, pledge periods, communications, and public commitment — but they're designed to accomplish different things.

Understanding those distinctions can help you choose an approach that fits your mission, your donors, and the culture you have locally.



01 — CAPITAL CAMPAIGNS

Funding a Specific Project

A capital campaign is generally organized around a clearly defined need, such as:

- Constructing or renovating a building
- Purchasing property
- Retiring debt
- Acquiring major equipment

Donors are usually invited to make campaign commitments **above and beyond** their regular annual giving. In a church, members continue giving their normal tithes and offerings while making a separate pledge toward the capital project.

This structure is relatively easy to understand: regular giving supports your ongoing ministry, while campaign giving funds a particular project.

Capital campaigns work especially well when the project is tangible, the need is compelling, and you want to maintain a clear distinction between ongoing operations and special commitments.

However, good communication must connect the project to your larger mission. Your church is not simply raising money for bricks and mortar; you are creating space for worship, discipleship, care, outreach, and ministry. Your nonprofit is not simply purchasing property or equipment; you are increasing your capacity to serve people and advance your mission.



02 — COMPREHENSIVE CAMPAIGNS

Funding the Larger Vision

A comprehensive campaign brings several kinds of giving together under one larger vision. Instead of asking donors to maintain their regular giving and make a separate capital pledge, you invite them to consider their total commitment over a defined period — often three years. That commitment may include:

- Annual or operating support
- Capital needs
- Special programs, missions, or scholarships
- Endowment and other strategic priorities

You then communicate one overall campaign goal representing the combined funding needed to sustain your current work and advance your future vision.

This model is common in educational institutions because alumni and other donors are often committed not simply to a particular project, but to the institution itself — supporting faculty, students, facilities, programs, and long-term priorities as expressions of the same underlying commitment.

The same dynamic can exist in a church. Members may be deeply committed to the church's overall mission and understand that personnel, ministries, missions, facilities, and operating expenses are interconnected. In that environment, a comprehensive campaign can help people think more holistically about generosity.



I have worked with churches where a comprehensive campaign made strategic sense on paper but would have created unnecessary confusion in the congregation.

THAT FIT IS NOT AUTOMATIC

This is particularly true when a church has a strong and deeply rooted tithing culture. Members may have been taught for years that the tithe supports the church's regular ministry, while gifts toward a building or special initiative should be given above and beyond the tithe. Asking those members to combine everything into one commitment can feel as though the church is redefining something they consider spiritually important.

The question is not simply whether a comprehensive campaign is technically possible. The better question is whether it fits your congregation's understanding of stewardship. A campaign should clarify generosity — not leave faithful people wondering whether the expectations have suddenly changed.



03 — CAPACITY CAMPAIGNS

Strengthening Your Ability to Fulfill the Mission

A capacity campaign focuses on strengthening your church or nonprofit's ability to fulfill its mission over time. The term is used somewhat differently across the nonprofit world, but capacity campaigns commonly focus on:

- Expanding the donor base and increasing recurring or annual giving
- Strengthening staff and developing leaders
- Improving fundraising, data, and technology systems
- Building reserves and creating a more sustainable development program

A capacity campaign may include some capital needs, but it is not primarily centered on constructing a building.

This approach may be appropriate when you have a compelling mission but do not yet have the infrastructure, donor engagement, staffing, or financial stability required for your next stage of growth.

Its success should not be measured only by the amount raised during the campaign. A successful capacity campaign leaves you stronger afterward: more donors are engaged, giving is more consistent, systems are more reliable, leaders are better prepared, and you are less dependent on a small number of supporters.

CHOOSING WELL

The Right Campaign Begins With the Right Questions

None of these models is inherently better than the others. The right choice depends on:

- ? What you need to accomplish
- ? How your donors understand their relationship to your mission
- ? Your existing stewardship and giving culture
- ? Your financial and organizational realities
- ? Which structure will communicate the invitation most clearly

The goal should never be to force your church or nonprofit into a preferred campaign model. It should be to shape a campaign around your people, your mission, and the realities on the ground.

Some consulting groups concentrate on a single model and move every client through essentially the same process. That standardization can make the consulting firm more efficient — but it can also result in your organization being shaped to fit the firm's system, rather than the campaign being shaped to fit you.



Discerning Partners has been called in to take over campaigns that have grounded out because of this — and I can tell you from experience, it's easier to make the right decision at the beginning than to try to make a change later in the process.

DR. JIM PACE, FOUNDER & LEAD CONSULTANT

HOW DISCERNING PARTNERS CAN HELP

We help you choose well — then build a campaign that fits.

- Discerning Partners has experience designing and guiding capital, comprehensive, and capacity campaigns.
- We begin by listening carefully to your people, your history, your stewardship culture, your financial realities, and the work you believe you are being called to undertake.
- We can help you determine which approach is most appropriate — and then build a contextual campaign that serves you where you are while preparing you for where you hope to go.

**Dr. Jim Pace**

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